

EDWARD PALMER'S VISIT TO GUADALUPE ISLAND,
MEXICO, IN 1875

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From the standpoint of the discovery of new forms of birds, one of the most important short expeditions in the history of North American ornithology (in the sense of the American Ornithologists' Union Checklist) was that made by Dr. Edward Palmer to Guadalupe Island off the coast of Baja California in the spring of 1875. In addition, his plant collections formed the first scientific botanical records known from the island and they give the best approximation of the vegetation there before introduced goats had done extensive damage.

Palmer (1831?–1911), at the time a man of about 44, had already been active off and on for a score of years, beginning in 1853, making collections in most branches of biology and ethnology in various parts of the United States, northern Mexico, and Paraguay, principally for the Smithsonian Institution. Further details of Palmer's life and work are discussed by McVaugh (1956) and in a paper read by Safford (1911) at the meeting of the Botanical Society of Washington on 10 January 1911 to celebrate Dr. Palmer's (supposed) 80th birthday, only a few months before his death.

Among the archives of the New Crops Research Branch (formerly Division of the Plant Exploration and Introduction) of the Agricultural Research Service, United States Department of Agriculture, are fourteen envelopes of manuscript material relating to Palmer's work from 1853 to 1911, twelve envelopes containing field books and copied data covering the years 1902–1910, and an unpublished manuscript in twelve envelopes by the late William E. Safford (1859–1926), a former botanist in the Department, dealing especially with Palmer's work as a plant collector. All of this material was drawn upon by Dr. McVaugh in writing the book on Palmer, but unfortunately space limitations prevented him from including many quotations. Two items relating to Palmer's first collecting trip to Guadalupe Island have so much human interest in connection with this first scientific expedition to that island that they deserve to be put on permanent record. One is an eight page manuscript by Palmer; the other a letter from Robert Ridgway to Palmer. The manuscript tells of Palmer's disagreeable experiences after his collections had been made, owing to shortness of food and the failure of the promised boat to come and take

¹ EDITOR'S NOTE: Dr. S. F. Blake passed away on December 31, 1959. His manuscript had been prepared in the form of a note; its posthumous publication in another form necessitated transferring parenthetical citations to "Literature Cited" and making other minor alterations in the introductory material. In addition, it seemed pertinent to incorporate information about Harry Bye Stewart and the items from the San Diego *Union*, all of which were contributed by Dr. Reid Moran of the San Diego Natural History Museum.

them off. The eight pages, written on only one side and measuring 22.3 × 14.5 cm., appear to have been copied from Palmer's notes after his return to San Diego and not entered from day to day upon the island. Safford evidently planned to use the manuscript in his projected publication (he refers to it in his published biographical sketch) and had corrected in blue crayon Palmer's frequently faulty spelling and grammar, but the journal is here printed in the original spelling, punctuation, and capitalization, with the addition in brackets of a few words that are needed for clarity, and the indication by "(sic)" of the principal misspellings.

Palmer sailed from San Diego on 30 January 1875 aboard the "San Diego" (*San Diego Union*, 30 January 1875) and may well have arrived at Guadalupe Island by the first of February. With him was his assistant for the trip, Harry Bye Stewart (1862–1922), the twelve year old son of Wm. W. Stewart, San Diego shipping agent. As related in the journal following, they were not taken from the island until nearly four months had passed. Palmer's second trip to Guadalupe Island in 1889 was briefer and less harrowing.

Palmer's journal follows.

Guadalupe Island. Lower Cal. *Dissapointment* (sic). *I miss the Alaska Expedition*. 1875. As arrangements had been made to send over a schooner after me in 6 weeks and no boat came, I became anxious & I went daily to Pt. Lookout to watch for it. All provisions had given out but goat meat & coffee & beans (sic) that had been on the island for years.

The young man [Safford's note: Harry Stewart] who had accompanied me, bore up well until the bread gave out, when he said he wanted to go home. I was kept busy carrying collections on my back a foot (sic), to the beach in a cave. These journeys were very tiresome, & all but one load was stored when I became sick.

April 30—it was [thought that] a schooner was [sighted] in the distance but, it was not,—a cruel dissapointment (sic) as I had expected to join a party for Alaska May 1st.—I had hurried my collections so as to [be] ready in/[p. 2.] 6 weeks & now to be kept back, together with physical weakness made me so sick that for some days [I] could with difficulty move about.

May 11—with much difficulty reached the Point, but no schooner. Coffee all gone & nothing to eat but old beans & goat meat. I ate mustard leaves which toned up the stomach somewhat.

May 14—all hands sick, including myself in bed for 3 days, with violent disorder of the bowels—& the fleas nearly ate me up & the flies by day, nearly worried the life out of me. As I could no longer [go] to point disappointment, asked Mr. Sanford [Safford's note: an old sailor, who was in charge of the island], to go. he was just able to be about. he said if Jack [the burro] came up he would go, so the yard gate was opened, for this faithful old /[p. 3.] Jack was very fond of bones, they where [were] always thrown in a pile for him, he could crunch them lik [like] a dog, this Jackass had carried not only myself, but several others over the Island, was a great favorite, he being worthy of a title named him Saint John, which name he went by. but he soon came along and while devouring his bones, the saddle was put on, and to [i.e., the] journey

to the point made but no boat. May the 15th.—the gate left open Saint John entered [and] while at the usual bone pile was saddled by Mr. Sanford, who rode to the look out, he returned and reported seeing an object like a boat approaching shore,/[p. 4] hopes revived, and the old name of the point restored, he went to the landing riding St. John, after much effort [I] rolled out of bed, and dressed, was sitting by the bed putting the remainder of my specimens the best I could together in bundles to carry them down to the landing, when Mr. Sanford returned with a man from the boat. he said he had come for me and my companion, the agents son Mr. W. Stewart, He said seeing the bundles, but you are not going to carry all that are you, yes I must try was the reply, they are birds, and valuable. no he said you are not able, and I doubt if/[p.5] you can walk to the beach. yes I must try, for the mules must be left for tomorrow. the sick men must go also. they are no use hear (sic), no medicine or food. The man took my choicest bundles on his back, and little by little, with his help started for the beach, leaving the rest with the baggage to come next morning, nearing the beach, and the boat was by a sudden puff of wind carried out to sea, my feeling at this sight was indiscribable (sic) it was near dark before she came again to anchor. It was a hard task to make the Journey to the beach, owing to my feebleness,/[p.6] after getting on board, my first request was after bread and tea, a small slice of bread was toasted a little, butter spread over it with a cup of tea, was given me and I fell over a sleep (sic) to awaken next morning late. The party from the Island came, things and men were put on board, they opened my Cave on shore, its choice contents brought on board. The Superintendent and one of the ablest men was left on the Island, all the provisions that could be spared from the boat, was given them, with the promise that more should speedily (sic) be sent them, when we /[p.7] bid them, the Island, and the faithful St. John, farwel (sic), and pushed off, food and drink was given to us sparingly, Reached San Diego, Thursday night may 20, 1875, weighing 125 pounds, going on the Island, weighing one hundred and sixty.

The cause of the long detention on the Island, was owing to the inability of W. W. Steward [Stewart],—with whom arrangements had been made to send a boat in six weeks, to dispatch one from San Diego before, as no boat smaller than mail steamer, entered the harbor of San Diego, during that time, if a boat was kept at the/[p. 8] Island, the hands might escape, and when the want of food, was made known by Telegraph to the President of the goat company, it turned out he had unintentionally (sic) kept the memorandum of Provisions in his pocket, instead of sending them on the Island at the time of my visit,—The distressed condition of those from the Island,—awoke the simpathy (sic) of the company, A new president was elected, and six months provisions with some new men was promptly sent on the Island.

In the San Diego *Union* for May 21, 1875, is the following: “The schooner *Coso* arrived last evening from Guadalupe Island to W. W. Stewart & Co., bringing up as passengers Dr. Palmer, of the Smithsonian Institution, Master Harry Stewart, and two of the men employed on the island. Dr. Palmer has been engaged in collecting specimens of natural history for several weeks past. There has been some sickness among the men on the island, the supply of flour having given out some weeks ago, and an exclusively meat diet having proved unwholesome. The schooner

left the men all the flour she could spare, and more will be forwarded immediately.”

The second item of interest is a holograph letter from Robert Ridgway, then twenty-five years old, requesting Palmer to use his influence with S. F. Baird, Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, to have Palmer's birds turned over to him rather than to Dr. Elliott Coues for identification. History shows that this was done.

Ridgway's letter to Palmer runs as follows:

Smithsonian Instn.
Washington, D. C.
Nov. 14, 1875

Dear Doctor:

I have just returned from a months absence at my old home in Illinois, and embrace my first opportunity to answer your favor of the 16th of October. On visiting the Smithsonian yesterday I found your birds in Dr. Coues' hands, but informed Professor Baird that you had requested me to work them up, and strongly urged my claim to the first right. Please write to him yourself *at the earliest moment*, regarding this matter, as I would like to work up all your collections in the bird line—will do it with pleasure, and in a manner which I am sure will meet your approval in all respects.

In looking over your collection I was astonished to find apparently *every species an entirely* new one [last two words not italicized]—most of them *very* distinct from any previously known, while Dr. C., was not aware of any difference whatever until I informed him. I will be glad to have all the information you can possibly give me regarding each species of these birds, and also full notes upon the geographical location, geological formation, natural productions of all kinds (particularly the flora and sylvia, since these influence so much the distribution of the birds) so that I will have material for an elaborate paper—in which you shall have full, and entire credit.

I am now making a hobby of big trees; and if you can supply me with any newspaper scraps, or original notes, on large trees of any part of the world, I will accept them most gratefully; the smallest items will be thankfully received. During the course of your explorations and ramblings you must have come across many “monarchs of the forest”—particularly in the tropics. And you probably have stored up much information, both general and detailed, in this branch.

Let me hear from you, and believe me, in haste Yours truly Robert Ridgway

Dr. Edward Palmer
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